

INTRODUCTION

Something I find enduringly difficult about *Middlesex*, and also ever exhilarating, is describing it. Not that it's hard to name the genre—it's a coming-of-age story, a family novel—or to offer a plot synopsis: *Middlesex* follows a young couple as they escape war-torn Asia Minor in the 1920s and settle in Detroit, where their children and grandchildren grow up. But with *Middlesex*, more than many other books, I always feel myself facing a decision when I get to characterizing the protagonist. I don't stay at this crossroads for long. Usually it's just a couple of seconds, since whoever has asked me to describe it is eager for some clue, something decisively revealing that will determine for them whether to read the book. But for those few seconds I'm keenly aware that whatever word I choose to name the main character will be both incomplete and circumscribing. This is true of all first

impressions and short descriptions, of course. But as we learn to forge brief, fungible accounts of ourselves or our intimates we forget how risky and contingent description is.

I've had lots of occasions to describe Eugenides's novel, to lots of different audiences. When friends have asked what I'm reading, when my parents have asked what I'm working on. Differently when Skyping with my aunt and uncle, who live in Bulgaria, where the culture is very different from that in the San Francisco Bay Area I call home these days. Last year I taught *Middlesex* in a class on the tradition of growing-up stories, and I previewed it to my mixture of English majors and non-majors whom I knew had lots of praise for the recent film *Boyhood*. Each time, I curate a slightly different account.

I notice that the different editions of *Middlesex* curate different accounts, too. The original 2002 Farrar Strauss Giroux back cover copy offers this: "A dazzling triumph from the bestselling author of 'The Virgin Suicides'—the astonishing tale of a gene that passes down through three generations of a Greek-American family and flowers in the body of a teenage girl." "The story of a gene," it seems to me, leaves something skirted, importantly un-specified.

The FSG hardback continues, offering plot points to approach toward what it is that this gene does: “In the spring of 1974, Calliope Stephanides, a student at a girls’ school in Grosse Pointe, finds herself drawn to a chain-smoking, strawberry blond classmate with a gift for acting.” Does it matter what color the classmate’s hair is? Perhaps it matters more that she has a gift for acting ... “The passion that furtively develops between them—along with Callie’s failure to develop—leads Callie to suspect that she is not like other girls. In fact, she is not really a girl at all.”

The continuation is telling: “The explanation for this shocking state of affairs”—an explanation is needed, the blurb makes clear, an explanation is demanded by the discovery that one is in love with one’s best friend and has failed to “develop”—“takes us out of suburbia—back before the Detroit race riots of 1967, before the rise of the Motor City and Prohibition, to 1922, when the Turks sacked Smyrna and Callie’s grandparents fled for their lives. Back to a tiny village in Asia Minor where two lovers, and one rare genetic mutation, set in motion the metamorphosis that will turn Callie into a being both mythical and perfectly real ...” It’s only at this phrase, “both mythical and perfectly real,” that I start appreciating the

blurb. Here it is, finally sensitive to the enormous task *Middlesex* set itself—and a task I feel a small part of, when I try to describe it to others. This is the task of depicting a particular kind of person, “a being both mythical and perfectly real: a hermaphrodite”—which the novel must do against the background of all the mythologizing and “realistic” interpretations that have preceded it.

It’s true that any story’s telling is preceded by other tellings, that no reader or listener receives any story in a perfect vacuum, but always in the context of their own previous associations and understandings. But with the story of a hermaphrodite the stakes seem especially high. There aren’t too many novels about hermaphrodites. There’s a rash of provocative nineteenth-century ones by the likes of Continental “decadents” such as Henri de Latouche and Théophile Gautier. On the other side of the Atlantic, the respectable American poet, foundress of Mother’s Day and authoress of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Julia Ward Howe, wrote a novel called *The Hermaphrodite* around 1846. It takes the perspective of an intersex individual, movingly, but Howe never finished it, and the incomplete version is mostly unknown today except to scholars of nineteenth-century American literature and culture. These

imaginative works—and a different, differently imaginative genre of medical discourses—are the forbears Eugenides’s text converses with.

So it makes sense that the FSG back cover takes its time working up to that striking name, “hermaphrodite,” softening and coloring it through the preamble.

What about other covers? The 2002 Picador paperback says this:

Middlesex tells the breathtaking story of Calliope Stephanides, and three generations of the Greek-American Stephanides family, who travel from a tiny village overlooking Mount Olympus in Asia Minor to Prohibition-era Detroit, witnessing its glory days as the Motor City and the race riots of 1967 before moving out to the tree-lined streets of suburban Grosse Pointe, Michigan. To understand why Calliope is not like other girls, she has to uncover a guilty family secret, and the astonishing genetic history that turns Callie into Cal, one of the most audacious and wondrous narrators in contemporary fiction. Lyrical and thrilling, *Middlesex* is an exhilarating reinvention of the American epic.

Here the story gets cast first and foremost as a family saga, a multigenerational epic about the American melting pot. *Hermaphrodite* delicately gets indexed in the phrase “genetic history that turns Callie into Cal,” but FSG’s generous, sympathetic adjectives (“a being both mythical and perfectly real”) here get replaced by the less fortunate “guilty family secret.”

The 2007 *Picador*, leaning into the lyricism of the narrator’s voice, chooses this:

“I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day of January 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974 ... My birth certificate lists my name as Calliope Helen Stephanides. My most recent driver’s license ... records my first name simply as Cal.”

So begins the breathtaking story of Calliope Stephanides and three generations of the Greek-American Stephanides family who travel from a tiny village overlooking Mount Olympus in Asia Minor to Prohibition-era Detroit, witnessing its glory days as the Motor City, and the race riots of 1967, before they move out to the tree-lined streets of suburban Grosse Pointe, Michigan ...

This blurb gives it to the novel's narrator to speak about his identity, and what the narrator offers are bureaucratic markers of that business of "turning Callie into Cal," dates and documents, birth certificate vs. driver's license. But still, no *hermaphrodite* in sight.

The Vintage Canada edition's blurb, the most expansive of all, swaddles the narrator in even more layers of stylistic evaluation and generic classification. Going for completeness, it ends up producing, I think, a voluminous circumlocution:

The first words of Jeffrey Eugenides' exuberant and capacious novel *Middlesex* take us right to the heart of its unique narrator: "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974."

Middlesex is the story of Cal or Calliope Stephanides, a comic epic of a family's American life, and the expansive history of a gene travelling down through time, starting with a rare genetic mutation. In 1922, Desdemona and Eleutherios ("Lefty") Stephanides, brother and sister, leave the war-ravaged village of Bithynios in Asia

Minor. With their parents dead and their village almost empty, Desdemona and Lefty have gradually been drawn closer together and fallen in love. As the Turks invade and the Greeks abandon the port of Smyrna, Lefty and Desdemona—Callie’s grandparents—escape to reinvent themselves as a married couple in America.

So, we learn about the story’s genre (“a comic epic”), about dates and nicknames (1960, 1974, 1922, “Lefty”), about the realities devolving from political strife (“their parents dead and their village empty”), and about a myth the novel will refract (“American life”). An informative set of coordinates, surely. Two more paragraphs summarize that new life in America, including the doings of Lefty and Desdemona’s cousins and children, the lives that lead to Callie. In terms of what Callie is, the cover copy enumerates events, and forgoes names:

So begins one of the strangest, most affecting adolescences in literature. As time passes Calliope gets taller and gawkier without developing into womanhood. Her classmates’ bodies change and they grow interested in boys; Callie remains flat-chested and waits in vain for her first period. And she has a curiously intense friendship with a girl at

her school, the beautiful and confident Obscure Object of Desire.

It is only when she has an accident at the Obscure Object's summer house and is examined by an emergency room doctor that Callie and her parents discover that she isn't like other girls. She is referred to an eminent New York doctor who, after extensive physical and psychological testing, pronounces her genetically male: 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome caused her true genital characteristics to remain hidden until puberty. Callie is a hermaphrodite.

There it is finally, plain and simple, in the summary's shortest sentence. But, buried six paragraphs in, and with two more paragraphs to follow, it does feel rather surrounded by other elaborations (and so many adjectives!) that claim the attention.

How different these covers are in their handling of that word, *hermaphrodite*! Some are forthcoming, and others ask "Why is Callie different?" and preserve the answer in enigma. Admittedly, the task of cover copy is to entice, to sell books. But still, the act of uttering a name has far-reaching consequences. "In a complex world there are many kinds," wrote Kenneth

Burke in *Attitudes Toward History*: “in naming them, we form our characters, since the names embody attitudes [and] shape our relations with our fellows [...] Call a man a villain, and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing. Call him mistaken, and you invite yourself to attempting setting him right” (4). Call him a hermaphrodite and ... what? Is naming a generous, a brave, or a cowardly thing to do? Is not-naming an erasure, or a strategy for survival? This is what concerns me—how we put what we know into language, how the name lives up to what we’ve seen, or doesn’t, how it determines what we’ll see and, in the end, what we think and feel.

What we name versus what we see. Before any reader reads the back-cover copy, they of course first encounter a visual representation, on *Middlesex*’s front cover. A range of ways to handle the hermaphrodite is in evidence there, too. The FSG cover from 2002 features a line drawing in black ink against a sky rich in saffron yellows and russets. The drawing, evoking old-timey illustrative etchings, shows a small human figure emerging from between the cup-like petals of a flower, surrounded by tall grasses. What’s different about Callie, the image seems to say, is that she’s been born from—she is?—a crocus. As we’ll see, the